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Bestselling
Series

#1 New York Times
BESTSELLING AUTHORS

Jack Canfield
Mark Victor Hansen

**Chicken
Soup** for the
Soul[®]

*Christmas
Treasury*

Holiday Stories to
Warm the Heart

CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SOUL® CHRISTMAS TREASURY

Holiday Stories to Warm the Heart

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Mark Victor Hansen



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When I was a very little girl, I spent a Christmas holiday at the home of the famed Polar explorer, Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd. His Boston library was decorated with memoirs, maps and artifacts telling of his voyages to the northern- and southern-most tips of the Earth. This Christmas was one of the rare occasions when the admiral made it home for the holidays. With no time to shop, he brought the only gifts he could to his beloved family; walrus tusk carvings, a bearskin rug and three child-sized sealskin jackets crafted by native peoples of icy lands. Each was a token of his love for a wife and children he barely knew.

Arms wrapped around my knees from my place on a whale-skin footstool, I asked him, “Do the people who live at the top and the bottom of the world give presents at Christmas, too?”

He leaned forward, his blue eyes twinkling beneath snowy brows and white, well-groomed hair. “Of course they do, and so do the animals,” he said. “But not just at Christmas. Take the emperor penguin. When he wants to show his love, he searches for the best rock he can find, picks it up in his flippers, waddles over to the object of his affection and hands it to her. Presents are simply a way of showing the love we feel all the time.” I gazed up in awe at this famous man and will never forget the words that came next. “It’s too bad we can’t make every day Christmas.”

It is with this spirit of love and giving that this book was created. This book couldn’t help but be about love since it focuses on Christmas, the time each year when the heart reaches out to everyone.

Thousands of stories were submitted for consideration in *Chicken Soup for the Soul Christmas Treasury*. We wish we could have published them all. We have picked the most touching and most meaningful stories. To make this the most profound collection of Christmas stories ever, we have also included a few classic Christmas stories from previous *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books.

We like to think of these stories as “heart-tuggers,” happenings in a writer’s life that moved us to such laughter or tears we yearn to tell them again and again so readers will say, “I had that same feeling once, too. Now I know I am not alone.” Stories like these brighten our lives, and help to restore the warmth and magic we all experience during the Christmas season, and hopefully throughout the rest of the year as well.

So curl up on a cozy couch with your children, grandchildren and friends, and read stories aloud from this beautiful Christmas treasury. Take a journey with us into times gone by. Feel the warmth, listen to the laughter, wipe away the tears, and relive the cherished memories that make lives complete.

With joy in our hearts, we hope these stories will fill your days with the kindness, strength and understanding that come from receiving the greatest gift we can give to others and to ourselves: the gift of love. Then you can go forward and help us make every day another Christmas.

Penny Port

THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

Christmas is not a time or a season, but a state of mind. To cherish peace and goodwill, to be plenteous in mercy, is to have the real spirit of Christmas.

Calvin Coolidge

The Gift of Grr-Face

No one has yet realized the wealth of sympathy, the kindness and generosity hidden in the soul of a child. The effort of every true education should be to unlock that treasure.

Emma Goldman

The mother sat on the simulated-leather chair in the doctor's office, picking nervously at her fingernails.

Wrinkles of worry lined her forehead as she watched five-year-old Kenny sitting on the rug before her.

He is small for his age and a little too thin, she thought. His fine blond hair hung down smooth and straight to the top of his ears. White gauze bandages encircled his head, covering his eyes and pinning his ears back.

In his lap he bounced a beaten-up teddy bear. It was the pride of his life, yet one arm was gone and one eye was missing. Twice his mother had tried to throw the bear away to replace it with a new one, but he had fussed so much she had relented. She tipped her head slightly to the side and smiled at him. *It's really about all he has*, she sighed to herself.

A nurse appeared in the doorway. "Kenny Ellis," she announced, and the young mother scooped up the boy and followed the nurse toward the examination room. The hallway smelled of rubbing alcohol and bandages. Children's crayon drawings lined the walls.

"The doctor will be with you in a moment," the nurse said with an efficient smile. "Please be seated."

The mother placed Kenny on the examination table. "Be careful, honey, not to fall off."

"Am I up very high, Mother?"

"No dear, but be careful."

Kenny hugged his teddy bear tighter. "Don't want Grr-face to fall either."

The mother smiled. The smile twisted at the corners into a frown of concern. She brushed the hair out of the boy's face and caressed his cheek, soft as thistledown, with the back of her hand. As the office music drifted into a haunting version of "Silent Night," she remembered the accident for the thousandth time.

She had been cooking things on the back burners for years. But there it was, sitting right out in front, the water almost boiling for oatmeal.

The phone rang in the living room. It was another one of those "free offers" that cost so much. At the very moment she returned the phone to the table, Kenny screamed in the kitchen, the galvanizing cry of pain that frosts a mother's veins.

She winced again at the memory of it and brushed aside a warm tear slipping down her cheek. Six weeks they had waited for this day to come. "We'll be able to take the bandages off the week before Christmas," the doctor had said.

The door to the examination room swept open, and Dr. Harris came in. "Good morning, Mrs. Ellis,

he said brightly. "How are you today?"

"Fine, thank you," she said. But she was too apprehensive for small talk.

Dr. Harris bent over the sink and washed his hands carefully. He was cautious with his patients but careless about himself. He could seldom find time to get a haircut, and his straight black hair hung a little long over his collar. His loosened tie allowed his collar to be open at the throat.

"Now then," he said, sitting down on a stool, "let's have a look."

Gently he snipped at the bandage with scissors and unwound it from Kenny's head. The bandage fell away, leaving two flat squares of gauze taped directly over Kenny's eyes. Dr. Harris lifted the edges of the tape slowly, trying not to hurt the boy's tender skin.

Kenny slowly opened his eyes, blinked several times as if the sudden light hurt. Then he looked at his mother and grinned. "Hi, Mom," he said.

Choking and speechless, the mother threw her arms around Kenny's neck. For several minutes, she could say nothing as she hugged the boy and wept in thankfulness. Finally she looked at Dr. Harris with tear-filled eyes. "I don't know how we'll ever be able to pay you," she said.

"We've been over all that before," the doctor interrupted with a wave of his hand. "I know how things are for you and Kenny. I'm glad I could help."

The mother dabbed at her eyes with a well-used handkerchief, stood up and took Kenny's hand. But just as she turned toward the door, Kenny pulled away and stood for a long moment, looking uncertainly at the doctor. Then he held his teddy bear up by its one arm to the doctor.

"Here," he said. "Take my Grr-face. He ought to be worth a lot of money."

Dr. Harris quietly took the broken bear in his two hands. "Thank you, Kenny. This will more than pay for my services."

The last few days before Christmas were especially good for Kenny and his mother. They sat together in the long evenings, watching the Christmas tree lights twinkle on and off. Bandages had covered Kenny's eyes for six weeks, so he seemed reluctant to close them in sleep. The fire dancing in the fireplace, the snowflakes sticking to his bedroom windows, the two small packages under the tree—all the lights and colors of the holiday fascinated him. And then, on Christmas Eve, Kenny's mother answered the doorbell. No one was there, but a large box was on the porch wrapped in shiny gold paper with a broad red ribbon and bow. A tag attached to the bow identified the box as intended for Kenny Ellis.

With a grin, Kenny tore the ribbon off the box, lifted the lid and pulled out a teddy bear—his beloved Grr-face. Only now it had a new arm of brown corduroy and two new button eyes that glittered in the soft Christmas light. Kenny didn't seem to mind that the new arm did not match the other one. He just hugged his teddy bear and laughed.

Among the tissue in the box, the mother found a card. "Dear Kenny," it read, "I can sometimes help put boys and girls back together, but Mrs. Harris had to help me repair Grr-face. She's a better bear doctor than I am. Merry Christmas! Dr. Harris."

"Look, Mother," Kenny smiled, pointing to the button eyes. "Grr-face can see again—just like me!"

Gary Swanson

The Christmas Rose

Christmas—that magic blanket that wraps itself about us, that something so intangible it is like a fragrance. It may weave a spell of nostalgia. Christmas may be a day of feasting, or of prayer, but always it will be a day of remembrance—a day in which we think of everything we have ever loved.

Augusta E. Rundel

A light snow was falling as she turned the key to open Rose's Flower Shop. The name didn't take much imagination, but then it was better than "Rosie's Posies" as Clint had suggested when she had first begun the business.

"Going to the Towers again this year?" asked Cass Gunther, who was opening the European deli next door.

Rose nodded. It was what they did every year. Supper and drinks at the club and Christmas Eve at the posh Park Towers. Swimming. The hot tub. Maybe take in a show. It was a tradition.

She turned on the lights, feeling bone-tired. As usual, people waited until the last minute to place their Christmas orders. Why did she do this every year? It wasn't the money, though business had gone well. It filled her days, and there was something soothing about working with flowers.

"I'll be home for Christmas . . .," the sentimental lyric wafted from the radio under the counter. Home was four extravagantly decorated walls, which she welcomed at the end of the day, but when it came down to it, what was really there for her? Perhaps if they'd been able to have children. They'd had a reasonably good marriage, the best house on Carriage Drive, money in the bank and enough friends to keep them from feeling lonely. And goodness knows they were too busy to think about whether or not they were happy. Bills for the mortgage, the car and boat, and a half dozen credit cards never stopped.

Rose sighed. A hollowness plagued her. Even anticipating Clint's surprise when he received the Pendleton sport coat she'd bought held little joy. His gift to her would be something beautiful, expensive . . . but she couldn't remember last year's gift or when they had taken time to really talk to each other.

She felt suddenly at odds, cross. Perhaps if they'd kept up with the family. But family meant Clint, two aunts in Virginia and her stepfather in Wyoming, none of whom seemed famished for their company. Hungry, that was it. She'd forgotten to eat breakfast.

The bell over the door announced a customer, but she kept her back to the counter, consulting the order book.

"Excuse me, Miss," an elderly voice called from behind her.

I haven't been a Miss in fourteen years, thank you. She swallowed the caustic retort and turned slowly to find an old man smiling at her.

He had all his teeth, a look of kind apology and a full head of wavy white hair. He held a plaid cap across his chest and gave her a quaint little bow like an aging Sir Galahad. "I'm looking for some flowers—for my wife."

At those words, something luminous lit him from within. She wondered if Clint ever looked that

way when he spoke about her. “I see,” she said slowly, waiting.

He tapped gnarled fingers over his cap in meditation and with warm authority in his raspy voice said, “Not just any flowers. It must be Christmas roses.”

“Well, we have roses. American beauty, reds, pink, tea and yellow . . .”

“Oh, no,” he said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “Christmas roses—white as snow—with some of that feathery fern tucked in. And I’d like a big red bow, too.”

“It’s Christmas Eve, sir, and I’m afraid we’re fresh out. . . .”

“My wife loves white roses,” he continued, looking at something she couldn’t see. “They remind her of the Babe of Christmas and the purity of his heart. She hasn’t seen any roses for such a long time. And now that . . .”

The old man’s shoulders drooped ever so slightly, then straightened again. Rose heard the faint tremor and was touched by something beautiful in the old face that made her think of alabaster. No, alabaster was too cold.

“She’s ill now. . . .” He paused and tucked his cap under his arm. “We served at a medical clinic in West Africa for more than thirty years. But we’ve had to return home. Nell has Alzheimer’s. We’re living at Country Gardens. . . .”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Rose breathed.

The man rushed on without a trace of bitterness. “I have a little room on the floor just below the nursing wing where Nell is. We share meals together—and we have our memories. God has been good to us.”

Rose returned his smile, uncomprehending, but unable to deny the man’s sincerity. White roses on Christmas Eve? She might be able to get them from Warrensville, but it would be a stretch.

“We’ll be spending Christmas Eve in my room—just the two of us—a celebration,” he was saying. “Christmas roses for Nell would make it perfect.”

“I may be able to get them sent over from Warrensville. . . .” Rose bit her lip. Was she crazy? It would take a miracle. Then there was the price. “How much do you want to spend?”

The man set his cap on the counter and dug out a faded wallet from his trousers that had seen several winters. He pushed four five-dollar bills toward her with childlike eagerness, then seeing her dismay, hesitated. “I hope it’s enough.”

“I could give you a nice spray of red roses in a bud vase,” Rose began. *White rose centerpieces would start at thirty-five dollars. Then the delivery charge would run another twenty, especially on Christmas Eve.* If she could get them!

“I had hoped for a real special bouquet . . .” he broke off, and she read his profound disappointment.

“Leave it to me. I’ll do my best to get you something nice,” she began, astounded by her own words.

“Bless you!” the old man said, reaching across the counter and grasping her hands. “Can they be delivered around four or five? It will be such a surprise! I can’t thank you enough.” Nearly dancing, he replaced his cap and began backing toward the door. “Arnold Herriman— Room 7! Merry Christmas! God bless you! God bless you!”

What had a tired old man with a sick wife have to be so happy about? She puzzled over that through the next few orders, then placed a call to a supplier in Warrensville. They could get her a dozen white roses at \$42.50—but it would be four o’clock before they could be relayed to her shop.

“Okay,” she said wearily, realizing that she herself would have to deliver the Christmas roses to Mr. Herriman. No matter. Clint would likely be delayed by a promising client.

The flowers arrived at ten minutes to four, and Rose quickly arranged them in a silver bowl, tucking in the feathery greens and sprigs of baby’s breath and holly. She secured a lacy red bow into the base and balanced it in one hand while locking the door with the other.

Country Gardens hardly resembled its name. Surely a couple who’d spent a lifetime healing the sick in an obscure village deserved better in the sunset of their years.

She found the residential wing and tentatively approached Room 7. Arnold Herriman, in the same old trousers and shirt with a crimson tie, beamed at her. She entered a room with a few pieces of old furniture and walls bursting with pictures and certificates. On the hall table was a crèche. *The Babe on Christmas and the purity of his heart*, Herriman had said.

A diminutive woman sat on the sofa with hands folded over a patchwork quilt on her lap. She had a translucent complexion and vacant blue eyes above two brightly rouged cheeks. A bit of red ribbon had been tucked into her white hair. Her eyes widened, then spilled with tears when she saw the flowers.

“Nell, darling. It’s your surprise—Christmas roses,” Arnold said, placing an arm around the woman’s fragile shoulders.

“Oh, how lovely!” Nell stretched out her arms, her face transformed in radiance. She rubbed one wrinkled cheek against the delicate petals, then turned a watery gaze on Rose. “Do I know you, dear?”

“This is the nice lady from the flower shop who made your bouquet,” Arnold said.

“Can you stay for a while, dear?” she asked. “We’ll be finished with our patients soon, and we’ll take you to our house for tea.”

“Oh, no . . .” stammered Rose.

Arnold touched his wife’s shoulder. “The patients are all gone, dear. We’re home, and it’s Christmas Eve.”

Rose’s throat ached with unshed tears and the sense that something beautiful lived here from which she was excluded. Could it be that in living their lives for others these two old people who had nothing but each other and a bouquet of white roses had everything that was important?

Suddenly, Nell plucked one of the long-stemmed white roses from the elegant bouquet and held it out to Rose.

“Please, I have so many. You must take one for yourself!”

“Yes,” Arnold said, taking the stem from his wife and pressing it toward her, “thank you for all your trouble.

God bless you.”

She wanted to say that he already had, that bringing them the Christmas roses had made her happier than she could remember in a long time, that on this Christmas Eve she had learned something about the meaning of the holiday she had missed until now.

Lt. Col. Marlene Chase

One Cup at a Time

Those that truly find God in the turmoil of prison's insanity are those that are likely to succeed.

Daniel Murphy

Nothing seems to bring people together like Christmas. The fact that I was now in prison made no difference. It didn't start that way at first.

The guards had placed a Christmas tree—roots and all—in each unit. The idea was for the men to make the decorations to go on it out of whatever they could find. Creativity was to be our only limit, with the winning unit awarded soda and popcorn.

The tree sat in the corner for a whole week. It seemed to be a symbol of the stripped dignity we all felt, being incarcerated at this time of year. Remarks were made by the inmates passing by as to what the staff could do with their tree. I, too, fell victim to the overall gloom that seemed to match the gray-colored snow clouds outside my window.

My longing for home and hearth made my spirits sink to an all-time low. I thought of the chain of events that put me here. I was feeling so depressed that I couldn't even muster up contempt for those responsible for sending me to prison. All the blame seemed to come back to one person—me.

I walked out into the open space of the unit and sat down on a chair to watch the others pass by—going nowhere. I sat away from some of the men who were seated at the other end of a long line of chairs. Straight ahead was the tree, its branches brittle from neglect. Pine needles lying on the floor told of its need for water and even I, foul mood and all, could not deny a tree a drink of water. I went to my cell, got my cup, filled it in the sink and walked back to the tree. I was almost afraid to move a branch for fear of it cracking. Its need for water was worse than I thought. After several trips of carrying water, one cup at a time, a lifer by the name of Buck came forward with a bigger cup full of water.

All the water in the world ain't gonna help these roots, I thought. Just then a young man named Shorty handed another cup of water to me. Several dozen trips for water were needed before the roots showed evidence of being saturated. Shorty poured in another six or seven cups, filling the bottom of the tin tub that held the tree.

“Just in case it wants a drink of water later,” he said.

As we stood around like medical interns who had just saved our first patient, it was Shorty who said what we were all thinking.

“It looks kinda naked, doesn't it?”

“I guess I could dig up somethin' ta put on it,” Buck grumbled.

“I'll make the rounds and see who can help,” said Shorty, taking off in a different direction than Buck.

I retreated to my cell with old memories of grade school running through my head, when glue and paper were crafted into wondrous masterpieces that Mom displayed with pride. My eyes shifted to a roll of toilet paper I had stashed away in a corner. Then I went on a hunt for a bottle of white glue that I had long since forgotten. After dumping my worldly belongings from the footlocker, I finally found

the glue wedged next to some letters from my ex-lawyer. I like to take those letters out now and then. ~~They were always good for a laugh—rereading the worthless promises of freeing me soon after a speedy retrial. To say the words were not worth the paper they were written on was truer than I ever imagined.~~

The letterhead was printed with big gold stripes that ran down each left-hand border. A spark of creativity connected some two remaining brain cells of mine that had been dormant for far too long. I mixed the white glue with warm water until I had a thin milky soup. Then I took the toilet paper and unrolled a handful. By dipping it into the mixture, I could squeeze it out and roll long skinny sticks.

I bent them in the shape of candy canes and laid them on our heater to dry and harden. With childlike glee, I took my lawyer's letters and with a pair of rounded kiddie scissors, I trimmed off the gold edging from every page. *My lawyer's letters are finally good for something*, I thought, as the radiator baked my creations into the shape of candy canes. I took the gold strip of paper and twisted a gold stripe down one of the drying sticks. *A fine job*, I thought, *even if I do say so myself*. They looked good enough to eat— all twenty-four of them.

As I stepped out into the unit, I was surprised to see a crowd of people around the Christmas tree. Buck was coordinating the trimming with all the tact of the cruise director on the *Titanic*. Handmade paper chains and ornaments were being hung everywhere. Someone had taken cotton batting out of three pillows and had balled it up to make a snowman.

Someone else had shredded the tinfoil potato chip bags into long strips and were hanging them as tinsel. I was not disappointed in the least when my candy canes got lost amongst the other wonderful items. The tree looked beautiful after a few hours.

We were all standing back to admire our work when Shorty came out of his cell carrying something. In his hand he had an angel. He'd covered a plastic bottle with the white silk lining he had cut out of his bathrobe, giving the angel a robe of her own. The head was made from a tennis ball and covered with hair he cut from his own head. He had cut the face from a magazine and glued it onto the angel's head. The wings were made of real pigeon feathers that he must have collected from the yard. Our angel looked a little weird, but it was the thought that counted.

Buck pulled up a chair for Shorty to stand on, and he proudly placed his angel on top of the tree. Shorty turned to all of us with a smile that was accented by his clumps of missing hair, asking, "How's that?"

"It looks right purdy," said Buck, and everyone agreed.

Our unit won first prize, and we enjoyed the soda and popcorn. Our tree was planted in the yard for everyone to enjoy, with hopes it would survive the winter. It did. The following summer was a hot one. A drought was killing everything, everything but the little Christmas tree, which somehow stayed watered all summer. Men carried water to it, one cup at a time.

Steven Dodri
Submitted by Tom Lagar

Christmas Presence

We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give.

Duane Hulse

It was the night before Christmas, and all through the evening I reminisced, fondly reliving past Christmases spent with my family. As a second-year nursing student, just nineteen, this was to be my first Christmas away from home. Although I knew that someday I'd be working on Christmas, I never expected to feel this lonely.

Secluded in my room, I yearned for the mouthwatering aromas of Mom's freshly baked cookies, hot chocolate and love. The absence of the usual giggling, slamming doors and ringing telephones made the dormitory seem cold and empty. The unappetizing smell of disinfectant replaced my visions of cookies and cocoa.

Standing in front of the mirror, I conversed with my reflection. "You wanted to be a nurse, didn't you? Well, you're almost a nurse. Here's your chance to find out what Christmas spirit really means. Determined to make the best of it, I turned in early.

"I'll be home for Christmas. You can count on me. . . ." My faithful clock radio announced reveille as I slowly dragged myself out of a toasty-warm bed. I trudged across the snow-filled street and grabbed a quick breakfast in the cafeteria before reporting for duty on the medical-surgical unit.

As I prepared to take vital signs on my first patient, I was startled by a robust voice that came from behind. "Merry Christmas to you. Want anything from the cafeteria? I'm headed that way, Missy."

I took the stethoscope out of my ears and turned around. From the dimly lit room I could see a gigantic, roly-poly elderly gentleman with long, curly hair, all decked out in a bright-red plaid shirt tucked haphazardly into baggy, red trousers. The trousers appeared to be held up by only two wide, fire-engine red suspenders that had long since outlived their elasticity. The only thing missing was the beard. This Santa Claus facsimile was standing in the doorway waiting patiently for an answer to his query.

Looking toward the bright hallway lights from the darkened room, I thought for a moment that I was dreaming.

"No, thanks," I responded. "I just came on duty. I'll grab something at lunch."

Before disappearing down the hall he added, "Name's George. Just let me know what I can do for you, Missy. I'll be right back."

As I cared for my patients, George was right alongside. I watched him spread holiday cheer as he became a guest to the patients who had no visitors that day. When trays arrived, he knew who needed assistance and who needed to be fed. He read letters and cards to those whose eyes could no longer see the letters on a printed page. George's powerful body and tender hands were always ready to help, hold, turn, pull up or lift a patient. He was a "gopher" who made countless trips to the supply room for the "needs of the moment."

George also knew when to call for help. While reading a letter to Mr. Jenkins, George noticed that the patient suddenly started to "look funny" and instantly ran to the nurse's station to summon aid. Thanks to George's swift action, we managed to reverse the effects of an impending diabetic coma.

Jovial George clearly enjoyed helping others while he spread cheer and told jokes—the same jokes over and over again, all day long, one patient at a time. We all enjoyed his presence that Christmas day.

When I finally took my lunch break, I was surprised to find the cafeteria elaborately decorated for the season. I sat down next to one of the staff nurses from the unit. During lunch with Andrea, I had the chance to ask a burning question. “Who is this George fellow? And why is he here on Christmas Day?”

“About ten years ago, George’s wife became seriously ill. He spent almost every waking moment by her side. Those two lovebirds were so devoted to one another. There was nothing he wouldn’t do for her.” Andrea stopped for a few moments, sipping her coffee in silence, before continuing. “George started to visit other patients while his wife was sleeping or having treatments. He was here so much that he seemed to take naturally to helping out wherever he could.”

My natural curiosity made me ask, “Does he have any family?”

A serious look came over Andrea’s face as she continued, “They never had children, and as far as I know, there are no relatives. But you see, George watched his wife suffer for a very long time. He shared every second of her pain and anguish. On Christmas Eve, after I prepared his wife for sleep, they prayed together. During the prayer, George promised his wife that if God would take away her misery that night, by taking her ‘home,’ he would spend the rest of his life as a Christmas volunteer.”

Andrea and I finished our lunch in silence.

Laura Lagar

Reptiles Reconciled

I will never forget the Christmas of my seventh year. I was going to sing several carols with my classmates in the Christmas pageant at school. We had been practicing for about a month. A week before the pageant, my mother's family had their Christmas celebration. Mother had been bragging about how I was to sing at school and I was cajoled into singing one of the carols for the Coulter clan gathered there.

Telling my aunt which carol to play, I sang out as sweetly and sincerely as only a seven-year-old can . . . "Hark! Old Harold's angel sings, glory to the newborn King. Peace on earth so mercy smiles, 'cause God and reptiles reconciled . . ."

That is as far as I got because my aunt could no longer play the piano, she was laughing so hard. My uncle laughed so hard he spilled his drink on his lap and when he tried to mop it up, he lost his balance and slid out of his chair.

I was mortified. I had no idea why everyone was laughing at me. I burst into tears and ran upstairs to my bedroom crying. I really was surprised when my oldest and most straitlaced aunt came into my room. (I had always been a little afraid of her.) She tenderly took me in her arms and with loving words told me not to cry. Everyone was laughing because of the wonderful new words I had sung for that Christmas carol. And even though everyone else had learned it a different way, mine was so much better.

She kissed me and then washed my face and told me to come downstairs with her because there was a surprise waiting for me. Hand in hand we took the stairs down to the living room. Just as we got there the music began to play and the whole Coulter clan began to sing my own words. As I stood listening to them sing my misconstrued version of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," I felt more loved than I ever had in my life.

My lips were still trembling as I stepped forward and began to sing. As my extended family sang carol after carol and arms slipped around each other in a warm familial glow, I realized Christmas wasn't about festive decorations or the Christmas tree or even the gifts under it. Christmas was about love given freely and with joy.

As one of my older cousins gave me a squeeze and a smile, I was sure Hark, old Harold's angel, was singing with us, and I had gotten the words right after all.

Linda C. Raybe

Delayed Delivery

Stella had been prepared for her husband's death. Since the doctor's pronouncement of terminal cancer, they had both faced the inevitable, striving to make the most of their remaining time together. Dave's financial affairs had always been in order. There were no new burdens in her widowed state. It was just the awful aloneness . . . the lack of purpose to her days.

They had been a childless couple. It had been their choice. Their lives had been so full and rich. They had been content with busy careers and with each other. They had many friends. Had. That was the operative word these days. It was bad enough losing the one person you loved with all your heart. But over the past few years, she and Dave repeatedly coped with the deaths of their friends and relations. They were all of an age—an age when human bodies began giving up. Dying. Face it—they were old!

And now, approaching her first Christmas without Dave, Stella was all too aware she was on her own.

With shaky fingers, she lowered the volume of her radio so that the Christmas music faded to a muted background. To her surprise, she saw that the mail had arrived. With the inevitable wince of pain from her arthritis, she bent to retrieve the white envelopes from the floor. She opened them while sitting on the piano bench. They were mostly Christmas cards, and her sad eyes smiled at the familiarity of the traditional scenes and at the loving messages inside. She arranged them among the others on the piano top. In her entire house, they were the only seasonal decoration. The holiday was less than a week away, but she just did not have the heart to put up a silly tree, or even set up the stable that Dave had built with his own hands.

Suddenly engulfed by the loneliness of it all, Stella buried her face in her hands and let the tears come. How would she possibly get through Christmas and the winter beyond it?!

The ring of the doorbell was so unexpected that Stella had to stifle a small scream of surprise. Now who could possibly be calling on her? She opened the wooden door and stared through the window of the storm door with consternation. On her front porch stood a strange young man whose head was barely visible above the large carton in his arms. She peered beyond him to the driveway, but there was nothing about the small car to give a clue as to his identity. Summoning courage, the elderly lady opened the door slightly, and he stepped sideways to speak into the space.

“Mrs. Thornhope?”

She nodded. He continued, “I have a package for you.”

Curiosity drove caution from her mind. She pushed the door open, and he entered. Smiling, he placed his burden carefully on the floor and stood to retrieve an envelope that protruded from his pocket. As he handed it to her, a sound came from the box. Stella jumped. The man laughed in apology and bent to straighten up the cardboard flaps, holding them open in an invitation for her to peek inside.

It was a dog! To be more exact, a golden Labrador retriever puppy. As the young gentleman lifted its squirming body up into his arms, he explained, “This is for you, ma'am.” The young pup wiggled in happiness at being released from captivity and thrust ecstatic, wet kisses in the direction of the young man's face. “We were supposed to deliver him on Christmas Eve,” he continued with some difficulty as he strove to rescue his chin from the wet little tongue, “but the staff at the kennels start their holidays tomorrow. Hope you don't mind an early present.”

Shock had stolen Stella's ability to think clearly. Unable to form coherent sentences, she stammered, "But . . . I don't . . . I mean . . . who . . .?"

The young fellow set the animal down on the doormat between them and then reached out a finger to tap the envelope she was still holding.

"There's a letter in there that explains everything, pretty much. The dog was bought while his mother was still pregnant. It was meant to be a Christmas gift."

The stranger turned to go. Desperation forced the words from her lips. "But who . . . who bought it?"

Pausing in the open doorway, he replied, "Your husband, ma'am." And then he was gone.

It was all in the letter. Forgetting the puppy entirely at the sight of the familiar handwriting, Stella walked like a sleepwalker to her chair by the window. She forced her tear-filled eyes to read her husband's words. He had written the letter three weeks before his death and had left it with the kennel owners, to be delivered along with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. It was full of love and encouragement and admonishments to be strong. He vowed that he was waiting for the day when she would join him. And he had sent her this young animal to keep her company until then.

Remembering the little creature for the first time, she was surprised to find him quietly looking up at her, his small panting mouth resembling a comic smile. Stella put the pages aside and reached for the bundle of golden fur. She thought that he would be heavier, but he was only the size and weight of a sofa pillow. And so soft and warm. She cradled him in her arms and he licked her jawbone, then cuddled into the hollow of her neck. The tears began anew at this exchange of affection, and the dog endured her crying without moving.

Finally, Stella lowered him to her lap, where she regarded him solemnly. She wiped vaguely at her wet cheeks, then somehow mustered a smile.

"Well, little guy, I guess it's you and me." His pink tongue panted in agreement. Stella's smile strengthened, and her gaze shifted sideways to the window. Dusk had fallen. Through fluffy flakes that were now drifting down, she saw the cheery Christmas lights edging the roof lines of her neighbors' homes. The strains of "Joy to the World" floated in from the kitchen.

Suddenly Stella felt the most amazing sensation of peace and benediction wash over her. It was like being enfolded in a loving embrace. Her heart beat painfully, but it was with joy and wonder, not grief or loneliness. She need never feel alone again.

Returning her attention to the dog, she spoke to him. "You know, fella, I have a box in the basement that I think you'd like. There's a tree in it and some decorations and lights that will impress you like crazy! And I think I can find that old stable down there, too. What d'ya say we go hunt it up?"

The puppy barked happily in agreement, as if he understood every word. Stella got up, placed the puppy on the floor and together they went down to the basement, ready to make a Christmas together.

Cathy Mill

'Twas the Night b4 Christmas

I wish we could put some of the Christmas spirit in jars and open a jar of it every month.

Harlan Miller

Two Decembers ago my dad called wanting to know what I wanted for Christmas. I mentioned a particular book and then interrupted myself and said, “No, what I’d really like is for you to put *The Night Before Christmas* on audiotape.”

There was this long pause and then Dad said with familiar stern emphasis in his voice, “Oh for God’s sake, Mary. What in Sam Hill do you want that for? You’re forty years old!”

I paused, feeling embarrassed yet determined, “Dad, I remember how good it felt when you used to cuddle us all up next to you on the couch when we were little and read *The Night Before Christmas*. I can still remember how strong your voice was, how safe I felt and how well you acted out all the different sounds. I’d really appreciate you doing this, since I live 2,500 miles away and I’m not coming home for Christmas. It would be nice to have you with me.”

Dad said, with a little more softness but still incredulously, “You mean you want me to read just like I did when you were kids, with all the bells and whistles and everything?!” “Yaaaaaah, just like that,” I said.

Again, he paused a long time and then said, “I’ll get you the book.”

I heard the clarity of his decision in his voice and resignedly said, “Okay. Talk to you on Christmas.” We said our “I love yous” and hung up. I felt bad but tried to understand. I assumed it was too much sentimentalism for a seventy-six-year-old bear, and that in his mind it was a foolish request for an adult to ask. Maybe. Maybe not. All I knew was that each time I talked to Dad his voice sounded more tired, and I was beginning to accept that it was no longer if, but when, the day would come that I wouldn’t hear it anymore.

On Christmas Eve day, a small, brown, heavily recycled padded envelope with lots of staples and tape all over it arrived. My name and address were written out in my dad’s memorable architect’s lettering with thick black magic marker. Inside was a tape, with a handwritten label, “’Twas the Night b4 Christmas.”

I popped the tape in my recorder and heard my father’s words come roaring out. “’Twas the niiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiight before Christmas when allllllllllllllllllllllllllllll through the howwwwwse,” just like when we were children! When he finished, he went on to say, “And now I’m going to read from *The Little Engine That Could*. I guess Dad had another message in mind when he included one of our favorite childhood bedtime stories. It was the same story we read to my mom when she was dying of cancer three years ago.

He continued with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing “Silent Night,” our family’s favorite Christmas Eve song we sang together before bedtime. And then “Oh Come All Ye Faithful” . . . song after song until the tape ran out. I went to sleep safe and sound Christmas Eve, thanking God for giving me another Christmas miracle with my dad.

The following May, Dad passed away suddenly and unexpectedly. No more phone calls every

Sunday morning, no more phone calls asking me, “What was the Gospel about today, Mary?” no more “I love yous.” But his voice lives on . . . and continues to remind me that I can do what I put my mind to and that I can stretch myself emotionally for someone else, even when it’s difficult. That’s the power of love.

For Christmas this year I sent my sisters and brother and their children a copy of the tape, which they weren’t expecting. My youngest sister called and left a tearful message on my machine that said “Mary, I just got the tape. Did you know that on the tape he said it was December 19. That’s today! When I put the tape on while I was in the living room, Holden [her two-and-one-half-year-old son], came running out from the kitchen full steam, yelling at the top of his lungs, ‘Grampa’s here, Grampa’s here.’ You should have seen him, Mary, looking all around for Dad. Dad *was* here.”

His voice lives on.

Mary Marcdan

The Santa Claus on I-40

The wipers struggled to push the heavy, wet snowflakes off the windshield while they kept rhythm to Willie Nelson singing “On the Road Again.”

Trint hit the eject button on the tape player. He’d heard that song four times in the last two hours and was sick of it. He shrugged his aching shoulders trying to shake off the miles. It was still a long way to Memphis, a storm was blowing in and Interstate 40 was getting hazardous.

In the distance, Trint spotted the welcome glow of lights at a truck stop and decided to pull off the road and grab a bite to eat while he waited to see if the weather would break or turn into an icy blizzard that would shut down the roads until morning.

He eased his orange Freightliner and fifty-three-foot-long trailer into an empty spot and shut it down. He was hauling a heavy load of tires to Nashville, and after that he was picking up a load in Baltimore and heading to Chicago.

He reached for his jacket and hesitated when he saw the box on the passenger seat. His mother had been worried about him spending Christmas on the road alone and had given him a box filled with presents. He smiled; his mom still treated him like he was a kid. He looked at his watch. It was nearly midnight on Christmas Eve, so he might as well open his gifts now.

Trint tore open the box and found a warm flannel shirt, probably blue. It was hard to tell in the dim light, but his mom knew his favorite color was blue. There were some heavy socks and leather gloves. Mom was always fussing over him and worrying her youngest son would get cold. There were homemade cookies and fudge and a red stocking with Santa Claus on it. He reached into the stocking and pulled out a toy tractor trailer that looked a lot like his rig and wondered how many stores his mother had to go to before she found such a close match.

His eyes stung. Next month he’d be twenty-five years old. He was a man. Men didn’t cry over cookies and a toy truck or because they were a thousand miles away from home on Christmas.

He climbed out of his cab and a cold blast of air hit him in the chest like a fist. He pulled his collar up and ran across the parking lot to the all-night cafe. He was tall and thin and without much meat on his bones to protect him from the cold. Inside, it was warm and cozy. A dozen truckers were spread out at the counter and tables. A man and woman and small boy were huddled in a booth, and they looked tired and unhappy.

Trint felt sorry for the boy. He looked like he was around eight years old, and no kid should have to spend Christmas Eve in a truck stop. The parents were loading up on coffee and Trint guessed they’d been driving somewhere to spend the holidays with relatives, and the snow forced them to hole up here. They were drinking coffee hoping to stay awake so they could finish their trip if the weather cleared up.

“It’s so cold outside, I was spitting ice cubes,” a fat trucker at the counter said, and the others laughed.

A cute waitress with blonde hair offered Trint a menu.

“I’ll have biscuits and gravy . . .,” he said.

“And iced tea with lemon,” she finished the order for him.

“You’re the only trucker around herewho doesn’t drink coffee.” She smiled and didn’t seem in a

hurry to leave.

“I’m surprised you remember me.” Trint returned her smile.

“How could I ever forget those beautiful brown eyes and your country accent?” she asked, hoping he would guess that she watched for him every time a truck pulled in.

“Well, I remember you, too,” he grinned. “You want to be a schoolteacher, I think you said first or second grade, you’re putting yourself through college by working here at night and your name is Melinda.”

“You do remember!” she said, liking the soft way he said her name. Color flushed her cheeks and she hurried off into the kitchen.

Funny how truckers picked up bits and pieces of other people’s lives. He looked across the room. Some of the truckers’ faces looked familiar but he didn’t know any of their names. He might see them again tomorrow at another truck stop, or never see them again. Sometimes the job seemed awfully lonely. Trint liked driving a truck, he liked seeing new places and he liked the good pay, but sometimes, like tonight, he felt lonesome and wondered if this was really the life for him.

He missed his family. His mom raised four kids by herself on a forty-acre farm in Missouri, but no matter how scarce money was, she’d always made sure they had a good Christmas. He thought about his box of gifts in the truck.

He looked at the kid again and knew what he had to do.

He forced himself back into the bone-chilling cold outside to walk to his truck. He grabbed the Christmas stocking out of the cab and hurried back to the warmth of the cafe.

He walked to the booth where the family sat in weary silence.

“I think Santa Claus left this for you,” Trint said and handed the red stocking to the boy.

The boy looked at his mother. She hesitated just a second and nodded. The boy eagerly reached out and took the stocking and dug inside.

“Wow! Mom, look! A big rig just like the real ones outside!” His crooked grin lit up the whole room.

“Tell Santa . . . well, tell him thanks,” the boy’s father said and shook Trint’s hand long and hard. The mother smiled gratefully.

Trint returned to the counter and ate his biscuits and gravy. He gave the waitress a twenty-dollar tip and told her merry Christmas. She said the money was too much, but he told her to use it to buy some books for school, and she took it and slipped him a piece of paper.

“Take good care of yourself,” she said. “And hurry back.” “I will . . . Melinda,” he promised and noticed she had the bluest eyes he’d ever seen.

Trint walked outside. It had stopped snowing and a handful of stars sparkled through a break in the clouds.

There was a tap on the window behind him and he turned to look. It was the boy. He was holding up the truck and laughing. Trint waved good-bye, and the boy waved back.

Trint felt good. Somewhere along the road tomorrow he’d call home and talk to his brothers and his sister. He’d tell his mom about giving the toy to the kid. She’d like that.

Trint reached his truck and stopped. Somebody had written “Merry X-mas,” in the snow on his windshield and hung a candy cane on his side mirror. He wondered if it was Melinda or the boy or on

of the truckers.

He started up his engine and felt the roar and power as he slowly pulled up to the road. Soon the snowplows would be out and clear the Interstate, but right now the road stretched out like a silver ribbon.

A quiet peace filled Trint's heart. He was a lucky guy. He had a job he loved, Melinda's phone number in his pocket, clear weather and miles of open road ahead.

He wasn't tired anymore, or lonely. He loved this life and he wouldn't change a thing.

Linda Stafford

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